Strategic Stability and Great-Power Rivalry in U.S.-Russia Security Relations

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the sources of continuing competition between the U.S. and Russia during the Trump Administration, on two different dimensions. First, at a structural or systemic level of analysis, we identify the main trends in the evolution of the post-Cold War international system, where the relative decline of the U.S. prepared the ground for a new era of great-power rivalry. Secondly, we look at Russian perceptions of the U.S. strategy and how images of the Western "Other" are still derived, to a great extent, from previous experiences of confrontation. In the third section, we present the uncertain future of nuclear disarmament as an example of how this climate of bilateral competition is affecting negotiations on the highly sensitive issue of strategic stability. The fourth section deals with the controversy over how much this confrontation resembles the Cold War, as well as the inaccuracies of the concept of "hybrid war" to describe the Russian strategy toward the West. Finally, our conclusions will try to assess the prospects for U.S.-Russia cooperation in an international and domestic environment that does not seem favorable for reaching constructive agreements.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States, rumors of a possible rapprochement—or even alliance—with Russia became widespread in domestic and international media. His offhand remarks during the election campaign seemed to indicate a lower commitment to multilateral defense organizations like NATO, as well as some personal admiration for Vladimir Putin's "strong leadership".

According to the new president, it was the Obama Administration—not the Kremlin—that was fully to blame for the current state of bilateral relations; however, all those past disagreements would be quickly resolved once he had a chance to establish a working relationship with his Russian counterpart.

Despite this initial optimism, the reality of U.S.-Russia cooperation since Trump took office has not shown any concrete achievements, while the climate of mutual distrust is still apparent. Both leaders have held much-publicized summit meetings that have produced few tangible results, apart from new opportunities for Trump's critics to renew their accusations of a secret "collusion" with Moscow to discredit Hillary Clinton. Although there was a visible relief among Russia's leaders when Clinton finally lost the election, the truth is that having Trump in the White House has not advanced the Kremlin's national interests in any meaningful way; unless, of course, those interests were limited to "wreaking havoc" and weakening NATO's internal cohesion, accelerating the end of the U.S. primacy as leader of a liberal, rules-based international order.

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Some of the Trump Administration's policies have, in fact, openly contradicted or ignored the Russian position on certain international issues that are of the utmost importance for Moscow: economic sanctions have been renewed, the annexation of Crimea is still considered to be illegal, and the U.S. has agreed to provide Ukraine with weapons for their war against Russia-backed separatist forces in the Donbass. This has caused the Kremlin to remain extremely wary of Washington's intentions, which are now much more contradictory and unpredictable than in the past. The logic of rivalry, not mutual trust or cooperation, is still clearly predominant in their bilateral relations.

This article examines the sources of this continuing competition between the U.S. and Russia during the Trump Administration, on two different dimensions. First, at a structural or systemic level of analysis, we identify the main trends in the evolution of the post-Cold War international system, where the relative decline of the U.S.—both in terms of material capabilities and social standing—prepared the ground for a new era of great-power rivalry. Secondly, we look at Russian perceptions of the U.S. strategy and how images of the Western "Other" are still derived,

Moscow's role in this Sino-American competition would be comparatively small: unable to aim for global dominance, it would either become a "junior partner" in China's anti-Western bloc or adopt a more neutral position, limited to preserving its own regional influence in the post-Soviet space

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2. U.S. HEGEMONY IN A CHANGING INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

While there is a widespread consensus that the international system can no longer be fully described in terms of American unipolarity—as in the first years after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, when the U.S. enjoyed an undisputed global primacy—, this new environment has proven much more difficult to define.

Some experts, notably Mearsheimer (2004), have argued that China's rise as a "peer competitor" of the U.S. represents the gravest danger to the latter's global hegemony, which will ultimately lead to an open confrontation in which Washington will try at all costs to prevent Beijing from becoming a superpower. According to Allison (2017) and his well-known metaphor of the "Thucydides trap", history shows that war is the most likely outcome when a rising power challenges an established hegemon, as is the case with the U.S. and China today. All these authors—in the tradition of political realism—tend to emphasize material or "hard" power resources, especially military and economic capabilities, as a way to measure relative strength. Therefore, we would be entering a hegemonic transition that could see the U.S. lose its current status as the world's only superpower, being replaced by China; or, alternatively, a new bipolar equilibrium in which Beijing would force Washington to share its global leadership with them. In any case, Moscow's role in this Sino-American competition would be comparatively small: unable to aim for global dominance, it would either become a "junior partner" in China's anti-Western bloc or adopt a more neutral position, limited to preserving its own regional influence in the post-Soviet space.

Russia and China, on the other hand, have promoted the view of a multipolar world in which neither of them would aspire to become a superpower, but try to balance U.S. hegemony by consolidating themselves—individually and jointly with the other BRICS members—as an alternative to Western-led alliances and institutions. While this multipolarity is not yet a reality in the military domain, where the U.S. remains clearly superior to any of its possible competitors, it is already present in the world economy (Nye, 2010), in which China, Japan or the EU should be regarded as centers of power in their own respect. This multipolar world would not necessarily lead to global conflict between Russia and the U.S. if Moscow's ambitions were limited to adopting a more relevant international role. On the other hand, if Moscow tried and managed to reestablish itself as a regional hegemon in Eurasia—countering the growing influence of the U.S., the EU, and NATO in the former Soviet Union—, it would effectively become a peer competitor for Washington; which now enjoys the privilege of being the only regional hegemon in the world, due to its *de*

facto control of the Western hemisphere. In that case, a resurgent Russia would be perceived as a direct threat for U.S. primacy even if it were unable—or unwilling— to return to a global bipolar confrontation.

However, all these possible scenarios are based on historical analogies that do not capture the profound changes in the nature of power in a globalized world, as well as the underlying causes of the perceived U.S. decline *vis-à-vis* its competitors. The increasing diffusion and fragmentation of global power into multiple actors—not just states, but also corporations, transnational networks, and other non-governmental entities—has been described as "age of nonpolarity" (Haass, 2008), in which major powers are not able to exercise their influence as much as they did in the past, and also—being economically interdependent—are less inclined to engage in regional or global competition.

In some respects, the Trump Administration's rhetoric seems to be walking the path toward "a world with no superpowers": for example, by questioning long-standing commitments to defending its European allies, or damaging its own reputation as a "liberal hegemon" aimed at spreading democratic values

This view is supported by Buzan (2004), who argues that the idea of polarity is not just connected to a state's material capabilities, but also to its social relations with others: in the near future, it is unlikely that China, Russia, or any other possible competitors will acquire a social standing comparable to the extensive network of U.S. allies and partners around the world, as well as the influence of American "soft power". In parallel, Washington would tend to disengage from other continents and focus on its own domestic problems, renouncing its own superpower status and allowing regional powers to consolidate themselves in different parts of the world. As a result, conflicts over global hegemony would be replaced by rivalries between countries in the same geographical area, competing for regional leadership and—eventually—great power status.

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3. RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. HEGEMONY AND PROSPECTS FOR BILATERAL COOPERATION

The unipolar nature of the post-Cold War international order and the aspirations to transform it into a multilateral system, where Moscow could assert itself as an independent center of power, have received an overwhelming attention by Russian scholars, experts, and policymakers. After a brief period of "liberal Westernist" euphoria in the early years of the Yeltsin presidency, "national-statism" (*derzhavnichestvo*) emerged in the mid-1990s as the official foreign policy doctrine (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 97). This view, based on the defense of Russia's status as a great power (*derzhava*) in a multipolar world, perceived the U.S. as a unilateralist hegemon that—together with its allies—repeatedly imposed Western interests and values on all other countries, through military intervention if necessary (Primakov, 2008). Therefore, Russia's recovery from its internal crisis and consolidation as an influential international actor during the 2000s were perceived by the foreign

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policy establishment as a limited and defensive move against a revisionist/aggressive U.S., not as preparation for any future attempt at establishing global—or even regional—hegemony.

U.S. unilateralism, however, has also been used by Russian leaders to justify their increased interventionism in the post-Soviet space in the past few years; a strategy that has clearly exceeded any purely defensive purposes, with an unwarranted use of military force in the face of challenges that could have been solved by other means. Although there is a great deal of victimhood in the self-serving argument that their military interventions in Georgia or Ukraine were simply "responding" to the threat of NATO expansion, it is also true that Moscow's concerns in this regard are genuinely shared by most of its foreign policy experts and government officials. Even today, traumatic memories of their country's internal weakness and vulnerability after the Soviet collapse are still influencing their assessment of the U.S. ability to preserve a hegemonic position in world politics, which—contrary to Western perceptions of a declining, not growing, American influence—tends to be greatly exaggerated in Russia.

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ideologies, as well as the historical construction of their respective identities in opposition to the "Other", considered an enemy. According to Shakleina (2018), Trump has largely maintained the same hegemonic foreign policies—exemplified by the slogan "America First"— as the previous administrations, including NATO's preservation as a useful instrument for U.S. leadership, despite his initial criticism of the unequal burden-sharing within the Alliance. Even from a liberal position, authors like Kurilla (2017) have complained about the continuing demonization of Russia by the American media and political class, which has caused a long-term damage to bilateral relations and resurrected some of the ghosts of the Cold War. This skepticism about the possibility of meaningful cooperation is confirmed by Bezrukov et al. (2017, p. 11), who—while being clearly sympathetic to Trump's opposition to the U.S. liberal establishment—also highlight the American president's belief in "taking a firm approach and advancing his own interests" in order to gain respect from Russia, which could lead to new tensions.

4. THE INF TREATY AS A SOURCE OF STRATEGIC (IN)STABILITY

Nuclear arms control and disarmament treaties remain one of the key areas of U.S.-Russia relations, at least from Moscow's point of view. The concept of "strategic stability"—often mentioned in the Kremlin's official statements after bilateral meetings with their American counterparts—refers to maintaining the balance of nuclear forces at a level that provides a sufficient deterrent for both sides, therefore eliminating temptations to launch a first strike. These agreements introduce an element of predictability, which contributes to avoiding misperceptions or miscalculations in case of crisis. However, Cold War understandings of strategic stability are no longer sufficient: in the present day, the U.S. and Russia should be able to jointly remove all incentives for any possible use of nuclear weapons—not only a first strike—, as well as to establish limits to other technologies that could have an equally destabilizing effect, such as space systems or conventional weapons with a destructive potential close to that of nuclear armaments (Arbatov, 2018, p. 26; Trenin, 2018). In this regard, Trump's plans to "terminate" the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty has raised concerns about hypothetical future deployments of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, a category that had been fully eliminated as a result of that agreement; as well as about the possible extension of the New START Treaty on strategic—i.e. long-range—nuclear weapons, due to expire in 2021 (Reif, 2018; PIR Center, 2018). The U.S. decision was formally based on their accusations of a violation of the treaty by the Russian side: specifically, having tested a ground-launched cruise missile that would supposedly fall within the range forbidden by the INF. Even if those accusations were true, some experts (Podvig, 2018) have argued that the military significance of those missiles—compared to other new weapons in the Russian arsenal—would not justify abandoning a disarmament treaty that has survived for so many years after the end of the Cold War. In the current climate of mutual distrust, both sides have made few attempts to provide information about their respective arguments in a more transparent way, which could have helped them overcome this disagreement.

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although some differences remain. The Russian president has tried to present his actions—without much success—as fully compliant with international law; for example, comparing the annexation of Crimea with NATO's intervention in Kosovo, while refusing to acknowledge his covert military assistance to the rebel forces in Donetsk and Lugansk. With regard to the U.S., the appointment of John Bolton as National Security Advisor has brought back the radical rejection of international law and multilateral institutions that characterized the neoconservative ideology of the Bush Administration; even a seemingly innocuous entity, the Universal Postal Union—one of the oldest intergovernmental organizations in the world—has been abandoned by Washington. In fact, it was probably Bolton who convinced his president of pursuing a more interventionist and unilateralist foreign policy course.

5. COLD WAR, COLD PEACE... OR HYBRID WAR?

The present climate of rivalry and mutual accusations may only be categorized as a "new Cold War" in the most literary and metaphorical sense: there are too many inaccuracies in this historical analogy to make it a useful conceptualization of the current state of U.S.-Russia relations. According to Walt (2018), the main differences are three: the Cold War was only possible in a bipolar international system, in which there were two superpowers—not one, like today—that stood in rough parity compared to each other. Secondly, the Cold War was an ideological confrontation between two mutually-exclusive universalist projects; today, on the contrary, Moscow and Washington are both part of the same global capitalist system, with the former accepting the basic premises of integration into the world economy. And finally, the Cold War was a global confrontation that expanded into the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America; now, these regions are comparatively much more determined by their own internal dynamics.

However, once again Russian views are more pessimistic: although a full return to bipolar confrontation would be impossible, there are some elements of it that could reemerge in the current scenario. An example of the military-geopolitical factors that have increased their threat perceptions has been NATO's missile defense system in European soil, which Moscow considers to be oriented against Russia; this has been used by the Kremlin to justify an ambitious modernization of their armed forces, trying to reduce the gap with the U.S. technological superiority (Oznobischev, 2016). All of which does not mean that Russia is willing to—or capable of—achieving parity with American military power, engaging in a new nuclear and conventional arms race. On the contrary, Moscow's tactics are increasingly focused on exploiting its own comparative advantages and the adversary's vulnerabilities in a cost-effective way: for example, using its state-owned media to spread propaganda and disinformation, in what some Western commentators have termed a "hybrid war" strategy.

This last concept is, sadly, another example of the increasing militarization of the language used to describe relations between the West and Russia, in an attempt at connecting the Kremlin's actions with their Soviet predecessors. As Renz and Smith (2016, p. 11) have clarified, "hybrid" warfare involves the use of military and non-military means in the same operation; for example, the occupation of Crimea, which combined information and propaganda with the

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deployment of intelligence operatives and elite troops. But these tactics cannot be understood as a Russian foreign policy doctrine, or even a national security strategy; they are just an operational approach in the framework of a military operation. In order to understand Moscow's actions in all their complexity, our analysis should encompass all of its other instruments—diplomatic, economic, cultural, and others—that do not necessarily follow a military logic.

6. CONCLUSION

From a structural realist approach to international relations, the rise of U.S.-Russian rivalry would be an unavoidable result of recent changes in the international distribution of power. The transition to a multipolar system, where China, Russia and other states have reasserted themselves as independent centers of power at the regional or global level, has produced an opposite reaction in the U.S., which feels threatened by the emergence of possible peer competitors that could challenge its own hegemonic position. On the other hand, this purely materialist understanding of power ignores the social elements that limit Moscow's future aspirations: namely, the absence of a "Russian model" that could be adopted by other societies as an alternative to Western liberalism, or Russia's clear disadvantage in terms of "soft power" on a global scale, when compared with the widespread diffusion of American culture and values.

The improvement of bilateral relations under Trump has been much more limited than initially assumed, in part because of unrealistic expectations based on the U.S. president's excessive self-confidence. The logic of competition has not completely disappeared with the arrival of a new American leader, nor is it likely to do so after Putin's eventual retirement. Both countries have global aspirations, but few common interests and values; in the security realm, their main shared priority is the fight against Daesh and other terrorist groups, which could provide the necessary incentive for establishing a closer cooperation. However, Putin has probably not forgotten his own experiences with the Bush Administration after 9/11, when Moscow's initial support for the "Global War on Terror" did not stop Washington from taking other decisions that directly challenged Russia's national interests, such as the invasion of Iraq. Any joint initiative in this regard will be cautious and limited in scope, far from a full-fledged alliance like the one between Moscow and members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Domestic factors will also continue to affect the ability of both leaders to explore other possibilities for working together. With lower ratings and continuing accusations of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential campaign, Trump will probably not want to appear too close to Putin; while Russia's president will not wish to risk his popularity in order to try a full rapprochement with Washington, after two previous disillusionments with Bush and Obama. The normalization of U.S.-Russian relations will have to be completed by their respective successors, given that the current leaders have grown too accustomed to unilaterally pursuing their own interests and regarding other world powers as competitors.

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